

REPORT ON LABOR UTILIZATION TRIP IN WESTERN STATES

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by

L. M. Vaughan, Labor Utilization Division,
Extension Farm Labor Program, U.S.D.A., Washington, D. C.

This trip, which included six of the western States, was primarily of an exploratory nature. Most of the time was spent in the field, in order to view first-hand some of the farm labor problems and situations of the western States, the types of jobs performed, the people involved, and the programs under way. Mr. Clinton Gaylord, Western States Area Director of the Farm Labor Program, accompanied Mr. Vaughan on the trip, which was arranged in each State by the farm labor supervisor.

The States visited were Colorado, April 29-30; Idaho, May 1-3; Washington, May 5-7; Oregon, May 8-10; California, May 12-17; and Utah, May 19-20. Mr. Gaylord visited Nevada and Arizona May 14-17 in lieu of the California field trip. A stop was made at area headquarters in Laramie, Wyo., on May 21. A chronological summary of all contacts was made for office distribution.

May was not an active period in many of the crop areas, but the specific jobs observed, where it was possible to stop and talk with workers, included sugar-beet blocking and thinning; hop stringing and training; asparagus cutting; strawberry picking; cotton chopping; orange harvesting; and potato harvesting. Visits were made to county agent and farm labor offices, farm labor information stations, Labor Branch and grower association camps. Stops were made along the way to talk with farmers and growers, and to observe on-farm seasonal labor housing, field equipment, and work methods.

Very little time was spent at college headquarters in most of the States. Contacts were made with the directors of extension, members of the farm labor staff, and short conferences held with individuals in the Departments of Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Engineering in most institutions.

This report is largely in the nature of a summary of reactions to what was observed, a recording of items of interest, and suggestions on activities related to a better utilization of farm labor. No attempt is made to report on details pertaining to operational activities encountered, as they are covered in the current State and area reports.

General Impressions

A person cannot travel through these large specialized crop areas of the western States without being impressed by the dependence of growers on outside sources of labor. It is no wonder that they are so concerned about the reliability of their labor supply, because a few days without it may make or break them for the year. When weather conditions change rapidly, the high specialization of an area means that everyone needs labor at once and usually for a short period only. The lack of continuous productive employment for seasonal workers is a problem that seems more acute in the west than in other areas that I have visited. If the labor supply were available locally, that might not be so serious. But to bring in outside labor just when needed, hold it over some low employment periods, and have it ready for the next peak requires advance planning and considerable guidance during the season.

599 (6-47)

JUN 13 1947

Largely as a result of the above situation, it is not surprising that growers' interests and those of the farm labor extension staff seem to be turning to three major activities, all related to the utilization of seasonal labor. They are:

1. Housing of seasonal farm labor.
2. Mechanization of field operations.
3. Efficient utilization of hired labor.

The interest in housing is undoubtedly related to obtaining better workers and holding them on the job longer. The interest in mechanization is largely a desire to reduce to a minimum the dependence of growers on seasonal labor and to reduce cost. The interest in greater efficiency of labor is to cut down further on the number of workers needed and help combat the higher wage rates that must be paid. All are related to each other, and become an integral part of the migrant labor program in the western States.

Generally speaking, those responsible for the administration of the farm labor program feel the need for facts with which to guide the decisions that growers will be making during the next few years in connection with their housing, mechanization and labor management problems. Some progress is being made by the experiment station and extension service in meeting the situation, but the studies are few in relation to the problems, and in most cases limited personnel and other demands have left little time for the Departments of Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Engineering to devote to these problems. The balance of this report will be devoted to a consideration of what is being done in the six States visited, with suggestions for further activity treated separately under the three major phases of work--housing, mechanization, and management.

Housing Seasonal Farm Workers

More is being done by growers in improving their "on-farm" labor housing than anyone realizes until they start down the road looking for it. This was brought out in our trip through Weld County, Colo. A study is just being started in Morgan County, Colo., to appraise the labor housing situation, contacting both growers and workers to find out what the conditions are and the needs for improvement. The results should provide the basis for an educational program. This is a definite step in the right direction.

Several States have publications and plans available for distribution to growers wanting to repair, remodel or build new labor houses. The Idaho bulletin, "Housing Farm Help," is an attractive publication that has been found very popular in that State.

While the trend in practically all areas of the west is toward "on-farm" housing, there are still many areas where "group" housing may be more desirable. Which will be preferable in a given area from the standpoint of cost to farmers, availability of workers to all farmers, full employment for workers, and satisfactory living conditions for both growers and workers is a question that can probably only be answered by research and experimentation.

Two adjustments in central housing are taking place at present and will undoubtedly be greatly speeded up as the year progresses. One of these adjustments results from a reduction in foreign workers, who were mostly singles, and an increase in domestic workers, who will be mostly family groups. The other adjustment will be from public to private financing. Most of the camps which are now housing domestic workers are being operated by grower associations, with farm labor funds being used sparingly to supplement the grower contributions.

Some excellent grower-operated camps were visited. There are questions being raised, however, as to what services should be supplied, and who should pay for them. After visiting the Southern Farmers' Association Camp at Cucamonga, Calif., which offered much in the way of facilities such as school, church, recreation, etc., it seemed very desirable that we begin to record the experiences of such groups and to study their management and financial structure. How far can you go in deducting the cost of a higher standard of living from a worker's wage? How much of the improved living conditions should growers assume as a labor cost in return for a better and more reliable labor force? All the information we can assemble along this line will be needed to answer the questions of growers as they begin to take on more and more of the problems of central housing.

And finally, an educational program on seasonal labor housing will have to consider with growers the implications of mechanization. How much fewer will be the number of workers needed? What changes will take place in the type of workers? Housing is usually a long-time investment and growers will want to look ahead and at least consider alternative uses for their construction as the seasonal labor pattern changes.

Mechanization of Field Operations

Mechanization of field operations is not in any sense new. It has been the natural trend from the beginning, speeded up and slowed down by changing economic conditions. We are now entering a period in which most factors seem to be favorable to rapid mechanization--high farm returns, savings available for spending, wages of hired help relatively high, most machinery in need of replacement, labor supply limited and uncertain, implement companies active from both a research and sales standpoint.

The only crops considered on this trip from a mechanization standpoint were sugar beets, potatoes, cotton, and hay. No attempt was made to make a thorough survey of mechanization activities, so that the comments here are just a review of some of the points that came up in the various discussions.

In Colorado considerable study has been made during recent years of hand operations in connection with sugar beets, beans, onions, potatoes, etc. The emphasis is now shifting over to mechanization. Haying studies have been completed and a proposed sugar-beet mechanization study has been outlined for the coming season. The two recent releases from Idaho--"Mechanical Harvesting of Potatoes in Upper Snake River Valley," and "Mechanical Harvesting of Sugar Beets,"--are examples of practical up-to-the-minute studies that should be very helpful to growers.

JUN 18 1947

In California, as a result of the special meeting of farm advisors held at Fresno, I became familiar with some angles of the problems of cotton mechanization. The report made by Wallace Sullivan at this meeting was of a preliminary nature and results are not yet available for publication. However, it is surveys of this kind, which evaluate the labor implications of mechanization, that are very much needed. Two publications available in California on the subject are "Experience in 1945 With Mechanical Cotton Pickers," by Cruz Venstrum, and "Factors Affecting the Performance of Cotton Picking Machines," by J. P. Fairbank and others.

There would seem to be a need for a close working relationship of the various departments in dealing with the problems of mechanization. There are problems of perfecting equipment, and problems with the way equipment is used. A new tool cannot be introduced into a harvesting job without affecting the whole process. Its effectiveness will often depend on adjustments made all along the line. New equipment changes the number and kind of workers needed. Perhaps the farm labor staff can give the guidance and coordination needed in developing some of these studies to more nearly provide the answers to the questions that are being raised by growers.

Efficient Utilization of Hired Labor

The growing interest in labor management opens up a field of educational work for the Extension Service in which we have very little background or experience. During the emergency period, supervision and training have been pretty generally applied to youth labor and their effectiveness well recognized. Training programs for war prisoners, and special training leaflets for all foreign workers were a part of the activities in most western States. As we now move out of the emergency period, questions are being raised as to why some of these items wouldn't be just as helpful to the regular domestic seasonal worker.

While the emphasis with inexperienced labor was largely on work methods, the interest of growers at present is much broader. They are thinking of the human aspects of the problem, for example: What makes a worker efficient? How can you keep workers satisfied? What should you expect of a worker? What does he expect from you? What determines his attitude toward his job and his employer? How important is instruction and supervision?, etc. In other words, they are interested in the whole field of employer-employee relations.

Russel Adams, of Oregon, has been doing some pioneer work along this line in farmer-foreman training meetings. These contacts usually consist of a series of three or four meetings about 1 week apart. They are handled on a discussion basis, growers contributing from their experiences with the leader guiding the discussion and adding interest through slides, movies, and other factual material where available.

As in most educational work straight discussion can go about so far. Then it needs to be supplemented by factual material from surveys and case studies. The earlier studies made in Oregon on factors affecting the productivity of workers are examples of some of the background material needed.

The training work at the beginning of the farm labor program in California in applying JIT (how to teach) and JRT (how to handle problems) to farm labor situations is still evident in county activities. Farm foremen were apparently very appreciative of the help given them in how to organize and conduct a training demonstration for a group of new workers, and how to handle the problems of human relations between workers and between worker and employer. Such training can still be effectively given without research studies, because it is merely an application of basic principles already known.

More studies are needed similar to those started in Colorado and Washington in connection with the National Farm Work Simplification Project. Whenever you go out to deliberately question the way a job is being done, time the operations, chart the travel, picture the movements, etc., you come out with suggested changes that result in savings from 15 to 30 percent in time and travel. On repetitive operations these savings are substantial.

But perhaps equally important to the immediate results that become available are the things which these job analysis studies invariably lead to in the way of further mechanization and in the organization of time and the management of workers in general.

General conclusions

As stated in the beginning this was an exploratory trip. My comments have of necessity been of a general nature. They do not cover many of the problems facing the farm labor staffs of the western States, but only attempt to point to a few that are related to a better utilization of labor.

The need for factual background information to help those responsible for the farm labor program seems so important to me that I have allowed it to color my entire report. You can't do much educational work until you have something to talk about.

There would seem to be two general reactions, resulting from the present status of the farm labor program. One reaction is to delay action along the lines discussed in this report until we know where the program is going. The other reaction is to do all we can now while we have the opportunity. With funds now available for the balance of 1947, even though limited, and with definite provision for liquidation of the emergency program, it may be desirable to consider more seriously what can be done during the next 6 months to bring together in a tangible and constructive manner various educational materials that will be helpful to farmers, workers and the Extension Service in coping with the various problems of farm labor in the next few years.

